

HISTORIC BRIDGETON

MATTHEW POTTER, HIS TAVERN

AND

THE PLAIN DEALER



F. Alan Palmer

**Cumberland County
Historical Society**



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2015

MATTHEW POTTER AND THE PLAIN DEALER

Cohansey Bridge, which in 1765 became known by the name of Bridgetown, may have been lacking in many shops of general merchandise in the days before the Revolution, but there was no dearth of taverns to accomodate the needs of both the travelers and the townspeople. It was at that time a village containing a permanent population of no more than one hundred and fifty men, women and children, representing perhaps twenty-five to thirty households.

To the colonial male the local tavern was far more than merely a place where he might quench his thirst, it was his club. It was the place where local happenings were discussed and, in the days before a local newspaper was published, the source of information regarding the happenings which had taken place in other colonies or neighboring communities, and brought to Bridgetown by travelers.

To be an innkeeper during the colonial era carried with it a certain social distinction. The innkeepers were the best informed and most widely acquainted men of the town. Excerpts from the wording of a petition for the licensing of a tavern gives an idea of the importance such an establishment held in the minds of those whose signatures supported the application, "*We the subscriber freeholders and inhabitants of the Township of Hope-well, believing that a publick Inn or Tavern to be necessary for the transaction of publick business, and will be conducive to publick good for the accomo-*

dation of travelers, do recommend this man as a suitable person to keep said Inn or Tavern, that he is a man of good repute for honesty and sobriety . . . ”

Although required to have food as well as drink available, the inn was by no means a restaurant. The bill of fare usually consisted of meat, cheese and generous slabs of crusty, freshly baked bread; very much like that found in the rural English pubs of today. During the winter months there might be added to the menu, steaming bowls of a hearty meat and vegetable soup or chowder.

In the typical household during the early days of our country very little water was used as a beverage. Taking its place was cider — hard cider — which had an alcoholic content equal to that of beer. This drink, which was served to even small children, was available not only in taverns, but was made at home as well. Philip Vickers Fithian records in his journal that for the use of their very pious family, in a single season a total of 750 gallons of cider was made as well as 15 barrels of ciderkin made by pouring water over the mast left in the cider press after the first squeezing. Rum and imported wines were stocked by every general store for the convenience of the housewife who would provide the jugs in which to take her purchase home. Thus it was the convivial atmosphere of the bar and the opportunity for meeting with friends which attracted those who patronized Matthew Potter's tavern.

Matthew Potter was born in 1734 in Ulster, Ireland where his father, a Scotsman from Edinburgh, was

engaged in the linen trade. Soon after Matthew's birth Irish industries began to suffer because of restrictions placed upon them by the British government. Harassed beyond endurance, his parents, with sons Matthew, James and John, emigrated to Connecticut in 1740; a few months later they moved to Philadelphia where another son, David, was born in 1745. It is not known when Matthew and David came to Bridgetown from Philadelphia, but Matthew set himself up in business as a blacksmith and operated a tavern in his home. David soon entered the mercantile trade buying and selling grain, produce and lumber, eventually prospering to the degree that the commodities were shipped to market in his own vessels.

Bridgetown in 1775 may have had as many as four ordinaries or taverns, some of which catered primarily to the woodcutters, a rough group of men whose occupation was harvesting the timber which was then shipped from Bridgetown to the markets of Philadelphia. Other inns served the needs of the hunters and trappers, all representing a different social strata than those who patronized the tavern adjacent to the court house.

The home and tavern of Matthew Potter was located on the north side of Broad Street, just opposite the entrance to the court house which then stood in the middle of Broad Street, and west of the diagonal road leading down to the Commerce Street bridge. It would appear to have been an ideal location for a

public house, and C.E. Sheppard describes it as "the principal inn of the town." Certainly, in 1775 it had become the favored gathering place for a group of young gentlemen who bore the names of some of the most prominent families of Cumberland County.

Among those who frequented Potter's place of entertainment were several of the young men who the previous year had participated in the burning of the English tea at Greenwich, as well as Joseph Bloomfield, the lawyer who had defended them in court. From today's view, the majority of these men would be considered to be intellectual activists who later demonstrated the sincerity of their convictions on the battle fields of the Revolution. The fact that he permitted the PLAIN DEALER to be displayed and read in his bar, placed Matthew Potter in personal danger in the days preceding the Revolution. A hazzard accentuated by the fact that his establishment was situated at the very doors of the court house which represented the enforcement of the laws enacted under the rule of King George III. The stocks and pillory which had been erected in Broad Street near the north end of the court house were an ever-present reminder of the punishment meted out to those who transgressed that law, as was the whipping post also located nearby.

Very little is known about Matthew Potter other than the fame which has accrued to him as the owner of the tavern on Broad Street in which during 1775-76 several young men, representing some of the leading families of the area, met regularly to read and discuss the latest

issue of the PLAIN DEALER. C.E. Sheppard merely states, "He was a blacksmith, and afterwards owned the lot at the southeast corner of Laurel and Washington Streets, extending half way to Pearl, and had a shop on the upper part of it. He was a man of very respectable standing." This would indicate that after he abandoned his career as an innkeeper, at some unspecified time, he moved his blacksmith shop to another location and devoted his time solely to that trade. He was the father of six children, but his two sons never married and therefore the family name was not carried on to the next generation.

One of Matthew's daughters, Jane, born in Philadelphia, in 1788 at the age of 17, married David Bowen and had one child, Harriet, who became the wife of Ephraim Holmes, the grandson of Ephraim Seeley, the owner of the mills at East Lake. Following the death of her husband, in 1798 Jane remarried, this time to become the third wife of Smith Bowen, the owner of considerable land on the west side of the Cohansey River as well as the hotel which had been the former mansion of John Moore White, on the corner of Commerce and Laurel Streets. In 1816, when plans were under way for the establishment of the Cumberland Bank, it was advertised that subscriptions would be received at "Smith Bowen's Hotel." Smith Bowen had been associated with Ephraim Seeley and James Lee in the construction of what was later known as Tumbling Dam at the north of the town, and in 1815 sold the land and water rights to David and Benjamin

Reeves who then built the Nail Works on that property.

The conclusion may therefore be drawn that although Matthew Potter never became as socially prominent, nor nearly as wealthy as his younger brother, Colonel David Potter, he nevertheless was considered to be a substantial member of the growing community at Bridgetown. He died in 1808 at the age of 74.

Potter's Tavern, which many years before had been converted into a two-family dwelling and then allowed to deteriorate to an advanced state of dilapidation, was saved from demolition, largely through the efforts of the late J. Meade Landis, a local historian, and in 1958 was purchased by the City of Bridgeton. The building was renovated and restored under the supervision of the late G. Edwin Brumbaugh, a noted restoration architect and today is open to the public, appearing much as it did when occupied by Matthew Potter.

THE PLAIN DEALER

Potter's Tavern achieved its position as a landmark of historic America through the means of a public notice which on December 21, 1775 was conspicuously posted in places throughout the county where it might be read and acted upon. The first paragraph of that notice is as follows:

"As the circumstances of the times loudly call for every individual to exert himself for the good of his Country and fellow creatures, several persons whose genius & inclination for many years past have led them to Study and contemplation, have

concluded, that the most Important Service that they can render to Society, will be to communicate — Weekly, to their neighbors the result of their enquiries and Speculations on political occurrences and other important Subjects particularly calculated to suit this place—”.

The notice further advised that since there was no press to print the articles received, they would be transcribed by a Secretary and could be read at Matthew Potter’s Bar each Tuesday morning and might be copied there by anyone wishing to take them home for further study,

“the Secretary being under Obligations to keep the names of the persons who wrote the peices secret, those that desire it, may communicate their sentiments to the public without the inconvenience of being known or personally critecised.”

William Nelson, in 1894, arranged to have the existing copies of the PLAIN DEALER, (at that time in the possession of a Bridgeton family), privately printed. In his introduction Mr. Nelson stated, “In its contents, it is evident that the original aim of the Bridgeton News-Letter was to imitate the ‘Spectator’ and other London publications, which in polished essays cleverly hit off the foibles of the day. To this was added the more serious purpose of arousing and stimulating the patriotism of the people.”

In preparation for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the founding of our nation, arrangements were made to have Mr. Nelson’s publication reprinted. J. Meade Landis, a member of the Bridgeton Bicenten-

nial Committee, in a foreword addressed to the readers, stated that the editor was Ebenezer Elmer who at that time was 23 years old, a native of Fairfield, a tea burner, and who later distinguished himself as a soldier and statesman, as well as in later years, as a public benefactor.

The only existing copy of the PLAIN DEALER is now in the rare book collection of the library at Rutgers, The State University, and itself is a copy of eight of the numbers which had once been posted in Matthew Potter's tavern. This copy, which was handed down in the Harris family, bears the inscription, "Thomas Harris his hand & pen wrote with my Blood the 1st Sept 1776."

The secrecy promised those who contributed articles to the PLAIN DEALER was well preserved. Today it is not known who were the authors, other than it would appear that Ebenezer Elmer wrote the eulogy of General Montgomery, in the seventh number, as well as the address to Captain Bloomfield's company in the eighth number. Other writers no doubt included Joseph Bloomfield, Richard and Lewis Howell and possibly Dr. Jonathan Elmer.

It is not known how long the PLAIN DEALER was written, but it is quite possible that the eight numbers which have been preserved constitute the entire output since the events leading up to the Revolution in 1776 no doubt demanded the attention of its contributors to the exclusion of writing weekly essays.

F.A. Palmer

